

10.19.2007 - Celebrating 30 Years of the New River Gorge Bridge

Every third Saturday in October, thousands of people converge in Fayette County to celebrate the birthday of the New River Gorge Bridge. Since its completion on October 22, 1977, we have witnessed the bridge work wonders for West Virginia.

Over the years, I have worked tirelessly to see that the New River Gorge is appropriately preserved and promoted, our natural landmark recognized, and the pristine and exhilarating whitewaters maintained for the throngs of admirers of the New River.

Construction on the bridge was completed in 1977, during my first term in Congress. Having grown up in Beckley and crossed the Gorge regularly in the era before the bridge's completion, I can personally attest to the incredible advancements the New River Gorge Bridge has brought to the area. By turning what was a winding 45-minute drive into a 45-second straight shot, that span helped to usher in new opportunities for many in southern West Virginia.

To this day, I am struck by the bridge's towering height and the knowledge that we could move the Washington Monument underneath and still have 325 feet of empty space remaining between the two.

From the first official Bridge Day in 1980, residents, visitors, excitement seekers, and government officials have looked down from the bridge to see one of the oldest and most beautiful natural sites this country has to offer. The waters of the New River below are cherished not only by West Virginians but also by people around the world.

Despite its name, the "New" River is one of the oldest rivers in North America. While still a Freshman Member of Congress, I sponsored legislation that first established its National River status. At the time, Senator Robert C. Byrd and Senator Jennings Randolph sponsored companion legislation in the Senate, and President Jimmy Carter signed the bill into law. Today, an estimated 1.2 million people visit

the New River Gorge National
River annually.

This miracle of
modern construction has put southern West Virginia on the map in more ways than one. Bridge Day
has made the Gorge the site of one of the largest, annual extreme sporting
events in the world, attracting thousands upon thousands of tourists from
around the globe. It can even be found jingling in purses and pockets
across the country, enshrined on the back of West Virginia's state quarter.

The New River Gorge
Bridge is proof positive
that transportation, technological innovation, and tourism comprise a winning
combination that can jump start local economies and ignite economic renewal.

The National Park Service
and West Virginia's
Department of Tourism are doing a great job helping to attract visitors from
near and far. Rafters, kayakers, BASE jumpers, and adventure lovers of
all kinds are discovering West Virginia's New River and other wild and wonderful
attractions. When visitors pay homage to West Virginia's natural wonders, they also
pay local merchants for goods and services, proving, once again, that nature's
bounty is good for business.

In the 30 years since
the completion of the New River Gorge Bridge, tourism
has taken off in southern West
Virginia. With attractions that provide
opportunities for hunting and fishing, hiking and biking, rafting,
rock-climbing, and even pampering, the future of tourism in West Virginia is bright and the
possibilities for prosperity and economic growth in our communities seem
endless.

The New
River Gorge Bridge is also a monument to southern West Virginia's outdoor
spirit. Our mountainous terrain, our forests and rivers, our whitewaters
and our rocky cliffs have long provided strength and identity for all West Virginians. It gives me great pride and
comfort to know that many years from now my great-grandchildren will be able to
visit to the New River Gorge and experience the spirit of West Virginia, just as we do today.

I encourage everyone to
visit the New River

Gorge Bridge

and celebrate its history and heritage. In its unwavering path, the determined waters that flow below, and the natural beauty that wraps all around it, the bridge offers the perfect opportunity to truly experience some of the best of southern West Virginia.